



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Reinstating a consensus of blame

**Citation for published version:**

Watson, JR 2016, Reinstating a consensus of blame: The film adaptation of Tessa de Loo's *De Tweeling* (1993) and Dutch memories of wartime. in G Quist, U Tiedau & J Fenoulhet (eds), *Discord and Consensus in the Low Countries, 1700-2000*. Global Dutch: Studies in Low Countries Culture and History, UCL Press, London, pp. 133-150. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781910634318>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.14324/111.9781910634318](https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781910634318)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

*Discord and Consensus in the Low Countries, 1700-2000*

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## Reinstating a consensus of blame: the film adaptation of Tessa de Loo's *De tweeling* (1993) and Dutch memories of wartime

Jenny Watson

Since 2000 there has been a proliferation of European heritage films about the Second World War. These films combine a 'Hollywood' aesthetic with a focus on private lives and history behind the front lines, producing films which exhibit national narratives concerning the past to an international audience. In the Netherlands, one of the first films of this type was Ben Sombogaart's *Twin Sisters* (2002), an adaptation of the best-selling 1994 novel *The Twins* (*De tweeling*) by Tessa de Loo. Through a comparison of the film and the original text, this chapter considers how the priorities of heritage cinema lead to a fundamental change to the story of *The Twins*, transforming it from a text which challenges established narratives of Dutch wartime history into one which upholds conservative views of the past. This emerges most strongly in the portrayal of German wartime experience, which is largely missing from the adaptation, and of the German character Anna, whose culpability is exaggerated by filmic as well as narrative devices. The choice to adapt *The Twins* as a romance serves the purpose of bringing cultural memories of Dutch wartime suffering to the fore, revealing heritage cinema's dual commitment to representing an easily-digestible view of national history to a national and international audience.

## Introduction

Ben Sombogaart's family melodrama *Twin Sisters*, released in 2002, is a film in which the Dutch imaginative relationship to the national past comes to the fore in a particularly interesting way. It was the first in a series of big-budget period dramas which focused on the collective memory of war in the Netherlands but which were made with an international audience firmly in mind. The film is based on Tessa de Loo's *The Twins*, which was adapted for the screen by Marieke de Pol and follows the experiences of twin sisters Anna and Lotte in a series of flashbacks from their present as old women to the period between roughly 1930 and 1946.<sup>1</sup> Their memories centre on the Second World War, and the fact that the two sisters were traumatically separated and brought up on different sides of the German–Dutch border means that their lives, and therefore the respective histories of the two countries, are placed repeatedly in contrast, giving the reader an impression of both what took place and, through their discussions surrounding it, how these events have been remembered.

In this chapter I will argue that despite the apparent narrative focus on Dutch–German history and relations, the film *Twin Sisters* is one which prioritises Dutch concerns and Dutch collective memory over transnational perspectives, and that its message regarding the past fundamentally differs from that of the original novel in this regard. Although the film retains the theme of reconciliation and presents the German character Anna as the more sympathetic of the two sisters, the basis for this sympathy as created in the novel is largely erased, with the filmmakers relying on more universal aspects of her experience – such as her inability to have children – and her pleasant personality to turn her into a heroine.<sup>2</sup> These decisions, alongside embellishments to the Dutch sister Lotte's story, mean that the film shies away from challenging the primacy of national suffering within Dutch memory culture surrounding the Second World War and as a whole represents an attempt to convey Dutch collective memory conservatively both within the Netherlands and abroad. In an international context, the film is best understood as a Dutch heritage film, which appeals to a broad audience through its simple melodramatic story, rich *mise-en-scène* and the communicative function which it serves in relation to Dutch history.<sup>3</sup>

## ***The Twins* (1993) at a turning-point in the Dutch–German relationship**

Since 1945, Dutch–German relations have undergone a gradual yet profound transformation and by the 1980s the public conception of the German as aggressor and perpetrator had been moderated by positive visions of Germany as a trading-partner, political counterpart and, increasingly, leading member of the European community.<sup>4</sup> However, there continued to be a tension between this normalisation of political and day-to-day relations and the ingrained collective memory of war, occupation and genocide. Residual unease surrounding the Germans comes to light in the field of cultural representation or remains hidden in private prejudices and unofficial collective memory. At the imaginative level, the Second World War dominates Dutch relations with Germany and Germans as a collective, despite the increasingly differentiated view of the past which prevails publicly. As Ian Buruma wrote in 1991:

There was never any doubt, where I grew up, who our enemies were [...] the enemies were the Germans. They were the comic-book villains of my childhood. When I say Germans, I mean just that – not Nazis, but Germans. The occupation between 1940 and 1945 and the animosity that followed were seen in national, not political terms. The Germans had conquered our country.<sup>5</sup>

Although Buruma was born in 1951, it appears that his description of the Dutch attitude towards Germans remained current, with a survey of young people in the early 1990s which asked the question ‘which country is the most likely to act aggressively?’ returning the surprising result that the majority of those polled saw Germany as a potential military threat.<sup>6</sup> This was a period in which relations between Germany and the Netherlands were particularly strained thanks (to varying degrees) to fears surrounding reunification, the veto by Germany of Ruud Lubbers as EU presidential candidate, and several contentious football matches between 1988 and 1992.<sup>7</sup> These occurrences, which had no direct connection to memories of the war (even if matches between the countries continued to be accompanied by cries of ‘eerst mijn fiets terug’), coincided with the racist attacks in Solingen, after which there was an outcry in Holland as fears of Germany’s latent fascist impulses momentarily

appeared to have been realised.<sup>8</sup> Researchers were reaching the conclusion that the third generation 'had as strong or even stronger anti-German feelings than their parents and grandparents', even as European nations prepared to mark fifty years since the end of hostilities.<sup>9</sup> It was in response to this apparent stagnation of Dutch feelings towards Germany that Tessa de Loo wrote *The Twins*, explicitly stating that she did so to counterbalance Dutch anti-German sentiment.<sup>10</sup>

Dutch remembrance of the Second World War both up until and beyond this point has generally revolved around two dominant narratives: that of the suffering faced by Jews in the Netherlands (epitomised in the story of Anne Frank and its public veneration) and that of the resistance. Although the counterparts to the heroic and sympathetic figures within these narratives have always been present within public discourse – the ogre-like German occupiers and their Dutch accomplices – the primary self-image of the Netherlands is of a victimised country whose citizens sacrificed a great deal to fight off fascist Germany. This consensus view was not significantly challenged until the end of the twentieth century, when space began to be made within the mainstream for counter-narratives and more in-depth investigations of topics like collaboration and resistance. In similar ways to critical interventions which had caused controversy in countries such as France (and Germany itself) somewhat earlier, Dutch scholars began to question the role and experience of the average Dutch citizen during the war.<sup>11</sup> Books such as Chris van der Heijden's *Grijs verleden: Nederland en de tweede wereldoorlog* (2001), concerning the often arbitrary reasons behind individual decisions to go along with the occupying regime, as well as studies of those who were marginalised from society following the war, such as the *moffenmeiden* (women who associated with German men) and children of collaborators, have complicated the established narrative of heroism and moral righteousness in the Netherlands.<sup>12</sup> As I shall argue in the following, *The Twins* was in the vanguard of this shift towards a more differentiated view of Dutch wartime history, less because it directly challenged the national self-image but rather because of the way it radically departed from established discourse and broadened what was possible in terms of representation at this time. Dutch memory of the war and judgement of those involved has been famously polarised, with the verdict 'right' and 'wrong' ('goed' and 'fout') irrevocably attached to parties and individuals within post-war discussions of the era. In many ways it is the complication of who or what is 'fout', just as much as the challenging of the absolute goodness associated with the resistance and the Dutch community at large, which destabilises the

consensus on the past in the Netherlands. By moving away from absolutist thinking, *The Twins* implicitly posed a great challenge to long-held Dutch ideas about the war.<sup>13</sup>

De Loo's best-selling novel, published in 1993, focuses on twin sisters, who were separated as children and adopted by relatives on different sides of the German–Dutch border, as they attempt to mend their relationship, which has been soured by the mismatch in their respective experiences of the war. The overtures for reconciliation are made during a chance meeting between the sisters – now elderly women – in the Belgian resort of Spa by the 'German' twin, Anna, who seeks the understanding of her sister Lotte and insists on telling her about her life during the war, repeatedly trying to explain why Germany followed Hitler and how she, as a powerless and basically apolitical person, brought up to be obedient, was not compelled to enter active resistance against Nazi rule. Lotte, whose Jewish boyfriend David de Vries was murdered by the Nazis in Auschwitz, is unable to countenance the possibility of empathising with any German and remains hostile towards her sister and what she regards as her excuse-making. The two women discuss the past over coffee and cake, reminiscing and arguing about their relative experiences until Anna dies suddenly, leaving Lotte to realise that her refusal to give her sister absolution was the product of prejudice and suspicion rather than her feelings towards her as an individual.

There was so much I still wanted to say to her, she thought, in a crescendoing feeling of remorse. Oh yes, what then, cried a cynical voice, what would you have said to her [...] something consoling? [...] Would you ever have succeeded in squeezing out those two words: 'I understand ...?' [...] Why had she remained stuck all that time in the resistant position she had adopted from the beginning? Although she had gradually acquired more and more understanding of Anna, she had remained fixed in unapproachability, intentionally obstinate. Out of misplaced revenge, not even intended for Anna?<sup>14</sup>

The central message of De Loo's work and the source of the didactic feel within the novel is the necessity of letting go of fixed narratives and emotions related to the past in order to move on. Lotte's gradual shift towards understanding Anna is a process in which the reader is closely involved, as an external witness to both characters' experiences and behaviour and as a judging subject for whom Lotte functions as a surrogate in asking questions and challenging Anna about her role in the

Third Reich. The conflict between sympathy and historical awareness which troubles Lotte must also be intrinsic to the reader's engagement with the text, with De Loo inviting the latter to go beyond the limited and belated understanding that Lotte feels for her sister. Negative critical responses in the Netherlands at the time were related to the idea that it might validate arguments about the German nation being 'led astray' by Hitler or to the representation of 'good Germans'.<sup>15</sup> As one critic said at the time, 'Good Germans are not real Germans.'<sup>16</sup>

The characterisation of Anna as a figure of sympathy and the representation of her experience caused comment because of De Loo's unusual decision not only to situate sympathy with a German character but to explore her motivations, including her ambivalent attitude towards the Nazi regime. In her reflections upon the past Anna both explains the attraction of National Socialism and offers what Lotte sees as apologist explanations for why people (herself included) were to a greater or lesser extent seduced by the promises of the Nazi party. However, in the sections set in the past, Anna is shown to demonstrate courage in deviating from the party line, for example when she goes undercover in the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* to spy for her local priest, and acting according to her own moral compass, such as when she refuses to treat Poles differently because of their status as 'Untermenschen'. Her greatest flaw, and the one for which she can offer no satisfactory explanation, is that she stood by as crimes were committed in her name and, occasionally, in her presence. On her wedding day she is distressed to see Jews being mistreated in the streets of Vienna and looks away, for example. In her ambivalent and purposefully challenging portrayal of Anna, De Loo works to combat anti-German sentiment less by mitigating German responsibility for what took place than by making their negligence – Anna's naïvety and self-centredness – appear human. In creating a relatable and flawed German character and forcing the reader into a close empathetic relationship with that character De Loo muddies the waters of a long-standing, and arguably all too comfortable, cultural stereotype of Germans as evil-doers.

The controversy surrounding a positive yet flawed German character is understandable, but in hindsight perhaps more challenging still to the status quo was De Loo's focus on German suffering. Since the late 1990s, the question of if and how German suffering can be represented without infringing upon the memorial 'territory' of their victims has preoccupied scholars and critics both in Germany and abroad.<sup>17</sup> To represent German wartime experience was unusual in the Dutch context, where Harry Mulisch's *Stenen bruidsbed*, with its images of the

bombing of Dresden, presents perhaps the most prominent example. In *The Twins*, German suffering is presented in unprecedented detail as Anna is bombed, forced to flee from the Russian army, loses her husband, attempts suicide and witnesses the destruction of the Third Reich. The litany of horrors she experiences (which reads almost as a checklist of the most common narratives of German suffering), as well as the immense trauma and loss of life to which she bears witness makes Lotte's stories of life in the occupied Netherlands appear less dramatic, if no less harrowing.

By the time the adaptation of *The Twins* came out in 2002, the critical climate surrounding German suffering had started to change, and critics responded negatively to the absence of German perpetrators in the story.<sup>18</sup> I contend that the representation (or rather non-representation) of German wartime suffering, alongside changes in plot and characterisation, is key to understanding both the film's position regarding German culpability and how the story of *The Twins* was adapted to suit dominant Dutch narratives about the war. If De Loo's novel reads as an attempt to rebalance the distribution of sympathy with regard to Dutch and German wartime experience, the film adaptation of her work demonstrates a will to redress that balance and return to a consensus of blame in which sympathy for Germans is revealed as historically unsupportable.

## Adapting the past

The term 'heritage cinema' was originally coined in British film studies and described the various literary adaptations, period dramas and historical romances produced in the 1980s, such as the Merchant Ivory series. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, the definition of 'heritage film', used to describe films with high production values that communicated national identity was applied to new time periods, such as the Second World War (Koepnick), and new contexts.<sup>19</sup> The idea of European heritage films has since emerged from this discussion, with critics describing them as 'films that combine generic appeal with literary and/or historical credentials' and a production trend of 'historical films offered up by a European nation as it tried to find its niche, both domestically and internationally'.<sup>20</sup> This interest in authenticity and dual commitment to representing the nation to itself and to exporting films conveying national identity to an international audience contribute to the dominance of narratives surrounding the war and fascism,



which are of especial interest in the USA, an important market for European film. Looking at lists of national films which have returned the greatest profits in the USA shows that historical subjects have proven the most popular, with German films leading the way in establishing what could be described as wartime melodramas as a European export genre. As Thomas Elsaesser has discussed in relation to German film, the dominance of Hollywood also contributes to the perception of target audience on the domestic market, with the American film industry determining the 'national exhibition sector' both because of its dominant role in distribution and the fact that cinema infrastructure primarily exists to enable the screening of Hollywood films, the most popular films in European countries.<sup>21</sup> For these reasons, the films designated 'European heritage films', or at least the ones that perform well at the box-office, tend to reflect a 'Hollywood syntax'; they are based around a simple, morally unambiguous melodrama and represent an easily-digestible view of national histories.<sup>22</sup> This trend has also been referred to as 'the cinema of consensus'; a response to the internationalisation of both film and cultural memory.<sup>23</sup>

In the Dutch context, films of this stamp only began to really take off in the late 1990s, which has been identified as the era in which Dutch film as such began to bloom again after decades in which little had come close to matching the successes of the 1970s.<sup>24</sup> In 1998 the editor of *NRC Handelsblad*, Raymond van de Boogaard, argued for the importance of film for the Dutch nation as a whole:

If the Netherlands does not join in here, the image of our land will shrink to that of a boring province. That would be completely out of step with the general post-war effort [...] to establish a greater role for our country within the concert of nations. [...] Without the export of good Dutch films to other countries we can – to put it bluntly – forget about ever having a Dutch head of the European Central Bank.<sup>25</sup>

This rather overheated opinion about the importance of self-representation abroad, which makes explicit the 'niche-finding' impulse identified by scholars, coincided with discussions concerning the importance of representing and producing national identity within the Netherlands, where the increasingly multicultural community was neither being represented nor being represented to.<sup>26</sup> In an article in *De groene Amsterdammer* in 2000, Gawie Keyser wrote that Dutch national identity was insecure and that a cinema was needed which

‘gives form to the collective national experience and memory’, with the implicit suggestion that this could then be digested by newcomers.<sup>27</sup> Keyser’s remarks are reminiscent of those made by Ed Buscombe in the British context in the early 1980s, in which he said that British cinema had come to be defined by the extremes of art cinema and the lowest common denominator of the *Carry On* comedy films, meaning that the country lacked an accessible, middle-brow *national* cinema which could appeal to a wider audience; mainstream film meant Hollywood movies.<sup>28</sup> The move towards a middle-brow Dutch national cinema with the potential for commercial success abroad was arguably spurred on by the Oscar wins for *Antonia* (*Antonia’s Line*, Marleen Gorris, 1995) and *Karakter* (*Character*, Mike van Diem, 1997) which had raised the profile of Dutch cinema, whilst the choice of a historical setting seen in those films would continue to be a feature of big-budget Dutch productions over the next decade(s). *Twin Sisters*, the first big-budget wartime melodrama to find a significant audience abroad since *De aanslag* (*The Assault*, Fons Rademakers, 1986) and *Voor een verloren soldat* (*For a Lost Soldier*, Roeland Kerbosch, 1992), was followed by the much larger hit *Zwartboek* (*Black Book*, Paul Verhoeven, 2006), as well as films such as 2008’s *Oorlogswinter* (*Winter in Wartime*, Martin Koelhoven) and 2014’s *Oorlogsgeheimen* (*Secrets of War*, Dennis Bots). Looking back over the Dutch films put forward for the Academy Awards since 2000, six films have been period dramas, and other historical films set in the 1940s and 1950s, such as *De Storm* (*The Storm*, Ben Sombogaart, 2006) and *Bruidsvlucht* (*Bride Flight*, Ben Sombogaart, 2008) have proved popular with cinema audiences. All of these wartime films which we see doing well aim at appealing to a broad range of cinema-goers and are characterised by a conservative, non-controversial approach to Dutch history, representing its major narratives of resistance and suffering whilst focusing on minor characters rather than political figures and emulating the ‘audience-friendly, identificatory aesthetics of Hollywood’.<sup>29</sup> The choice of women and children as protagonists in such films has been read as typical of the new European heritage film and representative of the desire on the part of film-makers to depoliticise history and provide characters with whom the audience can easily identify.<sup>30</sup> These films, although representing national history, play into a European discourse of remembrance which centres on universal themes such as bravery and sacrifice and is based around the recognition of suffering as well as the mantra ‘never again’.<sup>31</sup> As Wilfried Wims writes in connection to German film: ‘If we accept the thesis that a fundamental desire for normalization in the age of European integration accompanies

these productions, then the coveted badge of victimhood can more easily be obtained through someone who did not bear arms.<sup>32</sup>

### ***The Twins* as a Dutch wartime romance**

The shared European concern with normalisation and de-politicised recognition of the past is clearly central to the story of *The Twins*, which was called a 'European novel' by critics.<sup>33</sup> As Vanderwal Taylor explains, this term was applied to 'a kind of Dutch novel published with foreign markets in mind, in which European history is reflected in a contemporary narrative', an approximate literary counterpart to the heritage production trend.<sup>34</sup> The female leads provide, by dint of their gender, characters with whom the reading and viewing audience can identify freely, their relative lack of historical agency disembodying them from the complexities of past and present politics. The focus on women within *The Twins* may also have contributed to the film-makers' decision to depart from the content of the novel and focus solely on the romantic storylines, a return to generic convention no doubt designed to broaden the film's appeal and enhance the binary structure of the narrative. As I shall argue, reducing the two women's experience of war to their experience of loving and losing their respective partners is fundamental to the redistribution of sympathy within *Twin Sisters* and smoothes the return to a simplified narrative of blame when it comes to German-Dutch relations.

De Loo's novel is remarkable not only for the potentially contentious way in which Germans are represented but also for its detailed and sympathetic portrayal of war from a female perspective. While heritage cinema certainly prioritises non-combatant experiences for the sake of the opportunities this affords for including lush interiors and sentimental storylines, historiography and memory culture in general is still in the process of compensating for the dominance of male-orientated, 'top down' views of the Second World War. *The Twins* contributes to a reimagining of the past, featuring women who are not just witnesses but also powerful and conscious agents within twentieth-century history. Lotte is a rescuer and helper of Jewish 'onderduikers' (people in hiding), who risks her life to save family friends, distant acquaintances and strangers from discovery and deportation. Anna, meanwhile, finds herself both figuratively and literally on the front line of the war as she volunteers to be a Red Cross nurse following her husband Martin's death. Both are heroic and complex figures whose perspective is marked by what they

have witnessed. Their actions and experiences stand in comparative relation to each other through the format of the novel and are suggestive of the wider stories of their respective national communities.

In the film adaptation, much of the two women's agency is erased as judgement of the national past(s) and the validity of each sister's claim to audience sympathy are transferred onto the figure of each of their partners and their relationships. Anna, whose marriage to Austrian soldier and later reluctant SS officer Martin Grosalie ends with his violent death on the Western Front, is changed by her reduced historical agency (which I will discuss in more detail in the next section) into a character who is fundamentally less sympathetic in historical terms than Lotte, whose fiancé David is deported and murdered by the Nazis. This is compounded by alterations made to the plot and the portrayal of both relationships which redress the balance in a way that privileges the Dutch characters' experience.

Whereas in the novel Lotte and David share a brief romance and only discuss becoming engaged in passing, in the film their relationship is fleshed-out, idealised and made more dramatic, with David promoted from short-term boyfriend to fiancé and Lotte seen repeatedly drawing on the symbolic ink ring that he drew on her finger. He has a nickname for her, 'domme konijn', and offers her advice about her and her sister's relationship. David and Lotte are also shown to have been the first to meet, unlike in the novel where Anna and Martin meet years before Lotte and David and are involved in a long correspondence during the war. This shift in importance towards Lotte and the Dutch side of the narrative is also reinforced by the way in which Anna and Martin's relationship is portrayed, with the film giving the impression that it is *their* relationship that is brief and somewhat superficial, with greater focus on sex and fun than any intellectual connection.

The combined effect of the changes in the nature and seriousness attached to each of the sisters' relationships and, more importantly still, the way they are juxtaposed within the film is dramatic. The fundamental message of the novel, which aimed at promoting reconciliation between the Dutch and their German neighbours on the basis of recognising German suffering, is dismantled in favour of a simplistic calculation of guilt, suffering and moral superiority based around the two sisters' partners. Visually, this is represented in a number of scenes which contrast their relationships and emphasise historical context. The scenes surrounding David's arrest are particularly jarring in this regard, with the arrival of a postcard sent by

him from Buchenwald juxtaposed with a joyful scene in Anna's life, in a way which plays with the audience. Lotte is seen writing to Anna to ask her for information about Buchenwald before the camera cuts to Anna opening a letter and screaming, seemingly aghast. However, the scene changes in meaning when Anna begins to laugh and celebrate; her letter is from Martin and contains a proposal. The severity of the contrast in this scene throws the relative experiences of the two women into sharp relief, and makes Anna and Martin's happiness appear tasteless and inappropriate.

## Representing Jewish suffering

In addition to the prioritisation of the romantic storylines and the greater focus on the Lotte/David relationship which makes Jewish suffering more central within the story, several scenes are added and several removed from the narrative, which makes the adaptation of *The Twins* even more weighted against the Anna/Germany side of the plot. The absolute primacy of Jewish experience within the reckoning of suffering is reinforced by a scene which is inserted into the plot of the film and which can be read as metonymic for its entire message. In the early post-war period, when Anna comes to find Lotte in the Netherlands, her sister refuses to speak to her. After being persuaded to hear her out by her husband – the invented character of David's brother, Bram – Lotte is moved by the sight of the embroidered handkerchief which is used throughout the film as a symbol of the sisters' shared early upbringing and emotional connection. However, when she picks it up she uncovers a photograph of Anna and Martin, in which he appears in full SS uniform. The camera then does something interesting, shifting from the picture of Anna and Martin to a portrait of David on the sideboard (Figure 8.1).

The shift in focus and the lingering close-up on the portrait of David invites the viewer to compare the men portrayed and what we know of them. Both are sympathetic characters whose deaths have deeply affected the lives of their respective partners and both are shown to be apolitical and open-minded. However, ultimately the visual evidence (backed up by the changes to the plot made within the film) wins out. David's fate, and by connection the fate of the Jews of Europe, is incomparable to the deaths of members of the German armed forces and Martin is symbolically replaced and erased by the crimes of his country. Obviously in historical and rational terms this is true, but the film-makers reinsert politics into the apolitical, empathetic framework



**Fig. 8.1** Still from Tessa de Loo's *De tweeling* (*The Twins*, 1993).  
© idtv/Miramax

created by De Loo's text, obscuring much of what De Loo was trying to say about Dutch prejudice and the need to recognise German experience in their attempt to make their own position clear – and the film politically palatable.

More interesting still is the choice by the film-makers to bring Lotte and David's experiences into closer association, altering the plot so that rather than disappearing whilst playing music with friends in Amsterdam, David is snatched off the street while Lotte waits for him at the cinema, having returned to a café to find her forgotten handbag. As well as creating more melodrama in the Dutch setting, these changes fundamentally alter the perception of Lotte's suffering so that she appears to have both lost her life partner and potentially caused his demise – by forgetting her handbag. Her closer alignment with him also serves to shore up the credibility of her repeated allusions to Jewish suffering in her conversations with Anna; David's suffering becomes associatively synonymous with Lotte's suffering and sense of grievance.

## Reinstating German guilt

In addition to the structural aspects of *Twin Sisters*, such as the use of juxtaposition and the alterations made to the plot during the adaptation process, characterisation plays an important role in conveying the message of the film regarding German guilt and (by connection) Dutch credibility. However, the most dramatic difference between the

film and the novel is undoubtedly the way in which each portrays Anna who, as the character with whom the audience is intended to identify on the German side and root for in her attempts to reconcile with Lotte, is the most important figure when it comes to De Loo's attempt to challenge anti-German sentiment and complicate dichotomies of 'good' and 'bad'.

The issue of Jewishness also plays a role in the film's reimagining of Anna, in an original scene where Lotte and Anna meet in Germany in the weeks leading up to the German occupation of the Netherlands. Lotte has been visiting Anna, who is working for a landowning family near Cologne, and has witnessed the behaviour of German officers who are staying on the family's estate. After hearing the military men drunkenly sing songs about murdering Jews, she invites Anna to leave Germany and join her in the Netherlands, showing her a picture of David during the conversation. Anna recoils, laughingly apologising for thinking that he looked like a Jew. This scene, along with the incident with the German officers, makes Nazism and the Nazi persecution of the Jews into an issue within the twins' relationship from a much earlier point than in the novel. Unlike in the book, where Lotte does not initially associate Anna with problematic Germanness despite her view of Germans as 'barbarians', in the film she comes to see her as indoctrinated and therefore irrevocably alienated from her.

This assumption that Anna is a follower of the Nazi ideology is presented as false within the film, with Anna appearing apolitical and behaving in a good-natured and fair manner towards Poles and forced labourers. However, the film nevertheless makes her appear morally suspect and reduces her credibility through visual juxtapositions and the omission of indicators of her internal ambivalence regarding Nazism. The juxtaposition of Anna's scenes of joy with Lotte's loss of David and the sense that her life and happiness is in ascendancy while David is imprisoned and murdered by her countrymen erodes the potential sympathy of the audience for her experience. This impression of Anna as oblivious to suffering is repeated in another important scene in the film concerning forced labourers.

As Anna leaves her employer's home to visit Martin (Figure 8.2), her cart passes a group of forced labourers, one of whom is a man she has befriended during her stay on the estate. As she waves gaily to the German members of the household he approaches to say goodbye but is beaten to the ground by one of the guards. Anna looks momentarily perturbed but continues her journey, turning away from the man and



**Fig. 8.2** Still from Tessa de Loo's *De tweeling* (*The Twins*, 1993).  
© idtv/Miramax

his suffering. The powerful visual impression of Anna placed above and in front of the prisoners waving happily and her lack of response to the violence inflicted on her friend are telling, as is her attempt to justify the behaviour of the officers to Lotte by saying they have gone mad: she is a fellow-traveller does not choose to recognise what is happening.

As well as imbuing Anna with a greater degree of anti-Semitism and lack of awareness, the makers of *Twin Sisters* erase perhaps the most challenging aspect of the story of *The Twins* and the most important factor in the characterisation of Anna: her experiences as a Red Cross nurse. Among the most disturbing passages in the novel are the ones in which Anna cares for injured and dying soldiers during the final weeks of the war. These passages are important both for the paradigm-shifting first-hand representation of German suffering and the impact they have on Lotte within the novel; they provoke some of the few instances in which Lotte is able to look beyond her anger and prejudice against Anna as a representative of Germany and imagine another perspective on the war.

When Anna describes the destruction of the German armed forces and the sheer scale of human suffering she encountered, Lotte is unable to reject her stories as apologist rhetoric. She hears how Anna was left behind the retreating army with a group of immobile patients, unable to give them pain relief or even clean their wounds effectively, and about rows of hundreds of naked wounded men, left on the floor of the hospital to die because the medics needed their stretchers to bring in more casualties. She also describes her own failed suicide attempt, and the feeling



that her life had ended following Martin's death. Lotte responds to this account in total shock:

Lotte was staring at her. Behind the face opposite her for the first time she could see the young woman Anna must have been – on a stone bridge in the rain, in a corridor with dying soldiers. It touched her more than she could concede to herself. Making an effort to get her voice to sound matter of fact she said, 'How could all those badly wounded soldiers possibly be left behind?'<sup>35</sup>

In the film there are no exchanges in which Lotte softens in this way by appearing to recognise the suffering of her sister or by connection the German people. There are also no scenes of Anna's service in the Red Cross or of the suffering of German soldiers.<sup>36</sup> Instead she appears in a few brief shots in her uniform, without explanation.

The impact of this choice to omit representations of Anna in the Red Cross goes beyond her characterisation in that it dramatically alters the space given to German experience as a whole. The issue of German suffering, which is fundamental to the message and tone of the book as well as De Loo's reconciliation politics, is not addressed in the film to any extent, leaving Anna's assertion that Germans also suffered because of Hitler unsupported. Other notable omissions include the episodes in which Anna finds herself on the figurative front line of the war during the first aerial bombardment of Berlin and is nearly killed, as well as the allusions made to the mass exodus of Germans from the East ahead of the Red Army and the terrible conditions following the end of the conflict. It is in this failure to represent German suffering that *Twin Sisters* ultimately demonstrates its fundamentally different priorities. Overall the film puts forward a view of Germans (represented primarily by Anna) which is far more partial than the novel from which it is adapted and therefore plays into the types of narratives of 'German equals criminal' which began to be challenged in the 1990s.

However, the decisions the makers of *Twin Sisters* reached regarding what to represent must not be seen as solely the product of prejudice or a desire to reject the challengingly conciliatory tone of De Loo's novel. Anna, despite appearing to be morally culpable and having been stripped of her agency and heroism, remains a sympathetic character, whose gentleness, childlessness and apparent poverty contrasts with the cold, privileged air of the slightly older twin Lotte. Similarly, although her experience and loss of Martin is visually marked as incomparable to that of Lotte and David, the audience are invited to identify with her

through the course of the film. Other priorities must play a role in determining what is represented.

As I have argued throughout this chapter, this Dutch heritage film is primarily concerned with representing Dutch national identity and memory to *both* a domestic and foreign audience. Seen in this light the decision to remove elements of Anna's experience and to foreground the relationship between Lotte and David can be read as having been driven by the need to conform to the Dutch audience's imaginative understanding of the past as well as their potential reservations about sympathising with Germans. The main experiences represented by De Loo as shorthand for German suffering – aerial bombardment, civilian experiences of loss and the brutality of war – are not easy to reconcile with dominant Dutch narratives surrounding the Second World War.

Aside from the bombings of Rotterdam and Nijmegen, the Netherlands did not suffer significant damage from the air, with the sight of bombers overhead generally welcomed as a sign that Germany was under attack. The Dutch were neutrals until attacked by Germany, and after the occupation basically the only Dutch soldiers who fought did so for the Axis, so most Dutch civilians did not wait for news from members of the armed forces as other nations' citizens did – and those who did are marginalised from collective remembering. Similarly, the setting of the field hospital would not speak to the Dutch national imaginary. On the other hand, the addition of mistreated forced labourers and the greater prominence of David in the film, as well as his relationship with Lotte, can be read as an example of Dutch narratives of war being reasserted. The deportation and murder of Dutch Jews, along with stories of heroism by the resistance and the suffering of forced labourers, represent dominant streams within Dutch memory of the period. The bringing to the fore of David furthermore speaks to collective memory of war both nationally and internationally, shifting the focus found in *The Twins* to one in which pan-European, commemorative memory takes prime position. David is a character who serves the identificatory demands of heritage and whose absence in the second half of the film allows him to serve as a symbolic figure and representation of Lotte's suffering and Dutch wartime experience in general.

## Conclusion: a cinema of consensus

In conclusion, the film *The Twins* can be seen as part of a trend towards representing the past at home and abroad which has arisen in Europe

over the past two decades. It is a somewhat toothless adaptation of a more openly political novel which substitutes a kind of conversation about the past and what it means to recognise another's suffering with a melodramatic love story in a period setting which represents at most a rehearsal of established narratives of German evil and Dutch suffering. This approach can be read as a consequence of both a desire to appeal to the middle-brow and a concern with representing an acceptable portrayal of Dutch history on the national and international stage. The result is a film which is conservative in its message regarding the past and pessimistic about the possibility of meaningful reconciliation on anything other than a personal level, relying on private tragedy and universalised, apolitical suffering to make the reconciliation of the two sisters possible.

The omission of particularly German experiences of war can be read as the product of the film-makers' reluctance to risk threatening the primacy of Jewish suffering within the memory culture surrounding the Second World War, but it must also be seen as resulting from a concern with representing a particularly Dutch view of history. The film reduces the agency of the central female characters and identifies them more closely with their respective partners, with Martin's membership of the *Waffen-SS* eclipsing all his and Anna's other actions and, more worryingly, David's death allowing Lotte to take on the mantle of his suffering and speak from a position of moral superiority over her sister even though (as far as the film is concerned) she herself is only a bystander within the context of the war and resistance against the Nazis. Taken as a whole, the film represents a step towards the representation of Dutch cultural memories of war through the syntax of Hollywood and is the precursor to later, more successful films such as *Zwartboek* (*Black Book*, 2006).